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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## MARY HUNTER'S BIBLE<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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WHEN Joseph of Arimathea encountered Jesus on the way to Capernaum he scarcely recognized him, so shocked was he by the ragged shirt and the cloak of camel's or goat's hair that Jesus wore over it, all patched and in tatters, as befitted one who seemed to be a mendicant wonder-worker on his round from village to village. It was the face that halted Joseph as he turned away: a pale, bony, olive face, lit with brilliant eyes. Later, the tones issuing strangely from "his scrawny peacock throat," Jesus talked with him in a tender voice, discoursing of God, "his speech moving on with a gentle motion like that of clouds wreathing and unwreathing, finding new shapes for every period, and always beautiful shapes."

It is a good description of the narrative speech of Mr. George Moore himself, and you wonder with some concern what this new version of the life and sayings of Jesus would be like if it had been told in a different way—with a less delicate and insinuating art, an inferior power of visualization. Again and again in these pages it is a beautiful voice that one listens to, like the voice of Mathias when he lectured—a voice that brings out sentence after sentence "like silk from off a spool,"—even though there are moments when it ceases to be silken and turns into a rough and homely cotton . . . "for the moment he could not withstand his foreman a moment"; or when it turns into something disturbingly like the prose of the tourist's guide-book: as in a description of the domes and towers of the city of Tiberias at sunset, "bathed in a purple glow."

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<sup>1</sup> *The Brook Kerith*, by George Moore. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

Mr. Moore is often kind in his references to the person of Jesus; there are passages in which you almost suspect him of seeking to paint the Nazarene's portrait after the manner of the familiar and cherished legend: "the fine broad brow curving upward—a noble arch—the eyes distant as stars and the underlying sadness in his voice oftentimes soft and low, but with a cry in it": which makes it clear that Mr. Moore was not present when Mr. Frank Harris took Renan to task for calling Jesus "a handsome Jewish youth—" we do not know, Mr. Harris told Renan, "whether Jesus was handsome or not." But there are times in *The Brook Kerith* when you feel sure that Mr. Moore knew—and also there are many more times when you are troubled by doubts.

Certainly Mr. Moore came to the task he has essayed in this book after an impressively lengthy period of consecration. It appears that he has been familiar with the Bible for at least eighteen years. The year 1898 was in many ways one that extrudes from history. It was in that year that the United States fought the war with Spain; it was in that year that Australia formulated a Constitution; it was in that year that the Irish Local Government Bill was passed; it was in that year that Marconi demonstrated the usefulness of wireless telegraphy; and it was in that year that Mr. Moore discovered the Bible. A lady, uncertain what to give him for Christmas, was struck with the happy inspiration of offering him a Bible; and that Bible, bearing unequivocally upon its flyleaf the date "1898," has been the constant companion and chief literary interest of Mr. Moore (as he tells us in a dedication) ever since. Yet religion has long been one of Mr. Moore's hobbies, and in *Sister Teresa* he played with it very subtly: very exquisitely and simiously, as he plays with all emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realities. Of late years it has, indeed, been one of his three major preoccupations: the two others being, of course, the recording of æsthetic experience, and the charmingly resolute maintenance of his personal legend.

It was almost inevitable that Mr. Moore would some day write a life of Christ. The lady who in 1898 gave him a Bible as a Christmas present (her name, as recorded for immortality by Mr. Moore, shall here be likewise celebrated as Mary Hunter) was only partly to blame: she merely accelerated an arrival of destiny. For anyone who, twenty

years ago, was reading Mr. Moore, must have known that at some time the Pauline Epistles and the gospel as revealed by the Synoptists would call irresistably to him for revision. We now have the record of that revision spread before us in *The Brook Kerith*, wherein the figure of Jesus occupies the major part of 486 pages. He enters it as an Essene from the cenoby on the eastern bank of the Jordan: the shepherd of the brotherhood, waiting in the desert for a sign of his mission. "He'd have us believe that he is the Messiah that the Jews have been expecting for many a year," says Dan, contemptuously, to his son Joseph; "but it was predicted that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem; and everybody knows that Jesus was born in Nazareth. There's some talk, too, that he comes from the line of David, but everybody knows that Jesus is the son of Joseph the Carpenter. . . . He never could teach him to handle a saw with any skill, for his thoughts were always wandering, and when an Essene came up to Galilee in search of neophytes, Jesus took his fancy and they went away together." When Joseph of Arimathea met him, he was surprised to find that Jesus could not speak Greek, and that his ignorance of the world was surprising . . . "he seemed to believe that all the nations were at war."

You begin to understand soon after this how bravely Mr. Moore is following a wholly personal inspiration, when he describes a meeting between Jesus and Joseph on the plain of Gennesaret. In the eyes of Jesus glowered "a malignant hate": he "seemed to hate all he looked upon." When Joseph explained to him that he had been kept away by his father's illness, his story was swallowed up in a violent interruption, "Jesus telling him that there was no place among his followers for those who could not free themselves from such ghosts as father, mother, and children and wife." Jesus was at this time, we are informed, "a lamb as long as you're agreeing with him, but at a word of contradiction he's all claws and teeth." This irascible and ill-natured being does not long detain Mr. Moore, however: he crucifies him a dozen pages further on; and thereafter, for the subject-matter of the second part of the narrative, you have the story of an apostate and repentant Christ: a Jesus who did not perish on the cross, but was taken by the devoted Joseph of Arimathea from the tomb and slowly restored to health, dwelling subsequently in the monastery

of the Essenes by the Brook Kerith, where he tended his sheep and deplored his former pretensions to Messiahship.

After the death of the faithful Joseph (who had been slain in Jerusalem by order of the priests), there awoke in the heart of Jesus, as he wandered grieving upon the hills, a deeper than mortal grief: "It often seemed to him that his temerity in proclaiming himself the Messiah was punished enough by crucifixion: the taking from him of the one thing that crucifixion had left behind often put the thought into his mind that God held him accursed; and in his despair he lost faith in death, believing he would be held accursed for all eternity." Later—many years later, for he dwelt with his sheep among the hills above a score of years—he attained to a measure of serenity, a man detached alike from regret and hope. He felt that he must never look back, but in moments of great physical fatigue the past returned, and lay before him "like the evening sky in tranquil waters." Even the memory that he once believed himself the Messiah ceased to hurt. He felt that he had been wrong in reproving the keepers of the Temple for having made themselves a God according to their own image: "for what else is our God but an Assyrian king who sits on a throne and metes out punishments and rewards?" But though God does not desire love, "it cannot be that we are wholly divorced from God. It may be that we are united to him by the daily tasks which he has set us to perform."

Then, as Jesus walked through the quiet evening air, watching the shepherds eating their bread and garlic on the hillside, he recalled how he had striven against the memory of his sin; how he had desired only one thing—to acknowledge that sin, and to repent. But now it seemed to him that shame and the desire of repentance had gone from him, and he was conscious of some new thought. He reflected that God and his heaven "are our old enemies in disguise. . . . God is but desire, and whosoever yields himself to desire falls into sin. To be without sin we must be without God." And then Jesus wondered, startled, if any man had dared to ask himself "if God were not indeed the last uncleanness of the mind."

Afterward, when Paul, fleeing from his enemies, seeks refuge in the cenoby, he listens to a confession recounted by Jesus to the Essenes, and believes him mad; for Jesus explicitly sets forth the story of his delusion: "In

the time I am telling," he says, "I was so exalted by the many miracles which I had performed by the power of God or the power of a demon, I know not which, that I encouraged my disciples to speak of me as the son of David, though I knew myself to be the son of Joseph the carpenter; and when I rode into Jerusalem and the people strewed palms before me and called out, the son of David, and Joseph said to me, let them not call thee the son of David, I answered in my pride, if they did not call it forth the stones themselves would. In the days I am telling, pride lifted me above myself. . . . A day passed in the great exaltation and hope, and one evening I took bread and broke it, saying that I was the bread of life that came down from heaven and that whosoever ate of it had everlasting life given to him. After saying these words a great disquiet fell upon me, and calling my disciples together I asked them to come to the garden of olives with me. And it was while asking God's forgiveness for my blasphemies that the emissaries and agents of the Priests came and took me prisoner."

Nor can Jesus discern his own image in the Jesus preached and described to him by Paul: the Christ, Son of the Living God. "The Jesus that spake to thee out of a cloud," he assures Paul, "never lived in the flesh; he was a Lord Jesus Christ of thy own imagination." He and Paul depart together from the cenoby, Paul to resume his preaching of the Christ repudiated by Jesus, and Jesus bound for Jerusalem to tell the people that he was not raised from the dead by God.

Let us leave him as he reflects (through the meditations of his inspired disciple Mr. Moore) that "the miracle that Paul continued to relate with so much unction seemed so crude"; yet he himself had once believed "that God was pleased to send his only begotten son to redeem the world by his death on a cross. A strange conception truly." Sitting with Paul under a rock by the sea, Jesus declares his creed: "There is but one thing, Paul: to learn to live for ourselves, and to suffer our fellows to do likewise." They separate—Jesus on his way, not to Jerusalem after all, but to join company with some "strangely garbed monks from India," who were telling the people, a shepherd reports, "that they must not believe that they have souls, and that they know that they are saved"; which causes Paul to trace a likeness between the doctrines that Jesus had confided to

him and the shepherds' story of the doctrines that were being preached by the monks from India.

Mr. Moore is at pains to tell us in a preface that it has been his purpose to demolish the "fond and sentimental" Jesus of the Italian renaissance—the Jesus with "a woman's face, a blond beard, long ringlets: a figure without energy, without life, a pale effeminacy that in our time wanders about knocking at cottage doors with a lantern in his hand"; or the even less reputable image that "adorns the prayer books of certain Christian sects: a pale ghost with a Flaming Heart showing in his bosom, a love-lorn shepherd returning with a lamb in his arms." Mr. Moore really seems to believe that this conventionalized Jesus is the authentic Jesus of the modern imagination; and he points with pride, like an old-fashioned political orator, to "the rough shepherd philosopher" whom he depicts on the Judean hills. Mr. Moore is talking brainless nonsense. The flaccid and sentimentalized Christ who he fancies was in need of demolition faded out of the imaginations of all spiritually enlightened men long before Mr. Moore, with Mary Hunter's Bible under his arm, set forth gallantly to destroy him. But even if he had demolished anything more veritable and influential than a man of straw, his substitution would be rejected by everyone who has felt deeply the true quality of the Biblical Jesus. Mr. Moore says that, however much the reader may desire the supernatural Christ, he will be forced to admit that the author of *The Brook Kerith*, improving upon Renan, has "raised Jesus into some sort of manhood, which is at least a great step towards divinity." Mr. Moore is mistaken. The Jesus that he offers us—a malignant, ill-tempered, peevish, vainglorious, self-deluded impostor, glowering in hate, "all claws and teeth" (the words are Mr. Moore's), who later becomes a nerveless and repining sentimentalist: this ignoble caricature bears as much relation to the sublime figure of the Gospels, whether he were man or God, as—to quote Swinburne in a different connection—"a mutilated monkey bears to a well-made man." A Jesus robbed of divinity is not intolerable. A Jesus robbed of nobility is.

*The Brook Kerith* is in no way surprising. It is a consummate piece of art; and it is also precisely the sort of thing one would have expected to result from Mr. Moore's eighteen years of contact with Mary Hunter's Bible. Some,

observing with pain and outrage the effect of this contact, have so far relinquished their serenity as to charge Mr. Moore with perpetrating "an impudent and detestable profanation." Hearing them scold in this way, one conjectures that they may be thinking chiefly of Mr. Moore's query, put in the mouth of Jesus, as to whether "God were not indeed the last uncleanness of the mind." If they go on in that vein, they will be saying next that it is not God, but Mr. Moore himself, who embodies "the last uncleanness of the mind."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.